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The Mocking Bird

We used to call him the Mocking Bird around Lone Pine. He got that name the first day he landed. He was fluffing up a deck at one of the side tables, when Old Man Henderson rode up and lounged into Larry's for a drink. The stranger was ruffling the pasteboards in an absent minded sort of way and whistling to himself. Old Man Henderson waved us all up to the bar, and took in the stranger. "It goes for you too, Mocking Bird," said Henderson. Then the stranger calls all hands, and we have one on him. That was his christening, and if things have changed some with him since, he is still the Mocking Bird in Lone Pine.

He was the handiest man with cards that ever drew one in Lone Pine. He had Eastern clothes, and looked like a fellow with straight blood behind him. He lived up to his name all right; for he was a singer. He had one favorite hymn he used to pipe up whenever he got in wrong. It ran:

Can any white man be a gentleman,
And also a gambler?

Of course, any white man could be a gentleman and also a gambler in Lone Pine if he wanted to. We didn't draw it too fine there. There were just two sorts of people in Lone Pine: the ones who went by their real names and got letters from home and all that, and the others who called themselves whatever they liked and never went to the postoffice.

The Mocking Bird was hanging out at Purdy's Hotel; but he loafed in Larry's, watching the play. It was the second night, he says to Larry, "Why don't you work that end table?"

"Shy a dealer," says Larry.

"You are looking for me," says the Mocking Bird.

Larry looks at his hands, sees they ain't working hands, and then says in his short way, "It's yours. Cut in."

The Mocking Bird takes the end table and ruffles the deck, shoving it into the box like a man with education, and Larry knew he'd found a slick and pleasant citizen. Nobody paid any attention to the end table for awhile, but before the day broke the Mocking Bird had won some simoleons for the house, and had made a rep. Larry was tickled all over to find a man like that, and when the Mocking Bird settled for the night he handed him one of those gold twenties. Nobody but a good gambler gets twenty a night for dealing, and when Larry did that so a lot of us could see it he puts the Mocking Bird up on the high limb in this town. He went up from the end table to the head of the line mighty soon after he hired out to Larry.

All at once it dawned on us that he was a dude. The Mocking Bird sent to Frisco for his clothes. I don't believe any other man in Lone Pine could have been so fussy about his garments and got away with it as he did; he'd have heard remarks. Also at the table in Larry's he had peculiarities. First he'd take off his long coat, fold it up carefully, and give it to the Chinaman to put away. Then he would unbutton his cuffs and turn them back so they wouldn't soil on the table. The Chinaman would bring him a long glass of water and put it down convenient to his hand, and the Mocking Bird was ready for the game. After that first time when he was being sociable with us, no man ever saw him take a drink stronger than water.

By and by he bought a horse, and sent all the way to Frisco for the animal. He rode out of Purdy's stable one day on a gray sixteen-hand fellow that looked like a thoroughbred. How he did fit the saddle! And he made such a pet of the big gray that the thoroughbred would whinny when he heard him coming, and when he dismounted would follow him like a dog. We knew he could deal well—for the house, anyhow—that he could look well, could ride well, and was a full hand every way but one. He hadn't answered one Lone Pine question. Perhaps it was because he hadn't had

the chance; but it came one night at Larry's, and he showed what we had all been looking for.

Dirty Jim Thompson had come over from Pioche. Dirty Jim was big and strong as a bull. He had whiskers all over him, and was offensive as a man can be and live in Pioche. He couldn't live in Lone Pine at all. He was a loafer and a bad man, bad all over. Dirty Jim used to make a periodical of Lone Pine.

Larry was sorry to see him hulking into the place. He beared around awhile, and then loafed over to the Mocking Bird's game and sat in; but the luck ran against him, and in a few minutes his stack was gone. He bought another and tried hard. The Mocking Bird took all that. He'd been doing some grumbling along with the second stack, and when the Mocking Bird raked in the leavings, Dirty Jim rose up in red wrath and addressed himself to the crowd in a roar of rage.

"Fellers," he bawled, "that cussed dude over there deals crooked!"

The Mocking Bird never made a move; just kept on dealing as if nothing had been said. Dirty Jim belovged his challenge a second time, gazed around to see if anybody would take it up for the Mocking Bird, and then slouched over to the bar and called for a drink.

The Mocking Bird had lost his grip. You could see that plain as day by the way the crowd acted. He had not only taken the charge, but hadn't even had the nerve to quit the game as any square dealer would have done. Instead, he went on till the box was near empty, and when the turn was called he shuffled for the new deal, put the cards in the box, and nodded over at Larry.

"Send another man," he said.

"Sure," said Larry, who was sore.

When the relief came the Mocking Bird buttoned his long coat, and walked out of the place. Not a man followed him, not a man said a word of farewell. The idol had fallen.

We were all having drinks and refusing to talk about it, and Dirty Jim was getting more dirty every minute, when the Mocking Bird came swinging in. He was humming his little gambler tune, and looked almost happy. Dirty lunged forward to meet him. The Mocking Bird never stopped humming till he was three feet of Dirty. Then, very quietly and all the time smiling, he spat straight into Dirty Jim's face. Dirty let out a howl like an Indian, and reached. The Mocking Bird made a quick move into the breast of his long coat.

You just saw something flash, and before Dirty could get in, the Mocking Bird raised his gun and brought it down like a hammer on top of Dirty's head. When a man gets a blow like that, he's gone. He reached down and fastened a hand in Dirty's shirt. With a muscle nobody knew he had he bodily lifted the brute and leaned him on the bar. Dirty gasped and opened his eyes, and tried to pull loose, but the Mocking Bird held him.

"You know the trail to Pioche! Hit the grit!"

And Dirty went.

The Mocking Bird took off his coat, folded it carefully, took a sip of water, and began to riffle. In a minute the game was going, and the long last question of Pioche had been answered. The Mocking Bird had nerve; and also he was that gentleman he had been singing about.

The girl had been up at Old Man Henderson's ranch almost a month; but it was not until Henderson jogged in that we knew anything about her. "She's the best looking filly that's showed up in this part of the country," he said. "She's all boss. Doctor sent her out here from New York. Seems health is scarce round Eastern parts when they hike a blossom like her into a hard territory like this. The Doc in New York wrote her to me; told me to give her all the outdoors on the ranch, and charge it to

him. The old woman is plumb stuck on her."

"What's her name?" says one of the boys.

Old Man Henderson scratched his head and pondered. "Blamed if I haven't forgot! Up at the ranch we just call her Deary, and let it go at that."

So she was Deary for Lone Pine. After that we heard a good deal of Deary. Every time Henderson got to town he had something to tell us about her. "She's bought the best boss I had on the ranch," he said. "I sent to Frisco and bought a silver mounted straddle. She's getting wholesomer and purtier every day. The old woman has clean forgot papa in lookin' after Deary."

We heartened up on Deary considerable; but she didn't come down to Lone Pine. We met her another way. Six or seven of us, including the Mocking Bird, had fixed up a hunting trip back in the range. It was up in the hills we learned how easy Dirty Jim would have been to him. He was the quickest snap shot with a six shooter I ever saw, and I've seen some. We had a vast respect for the Mocking Bird before we'd loaded a wagon with fresh venison and headed home.

Lone Pine Creek, which is responsible for Lone Pine Town, runs just south of Henderson's ranch, when it runs at all. When there are rains in the mountains, it rises in two hours to a roaring river. The ford on our trail had been dry as a bone when we crossed it going in. When we came out it was a flood, and the ford was swimming deep to a horse. Quicksand is mighty likely to drift into the ford shallows at a time like that; so we, knowing the creek would run down in a couple of hours, unsaddled our horses and laid down for a smoke.

We hadn't been there long when we saw a cloud of dust on the trail to the ford from the other side; Deary was coming down to look at the freshet. She kept on coming with that confidence which women have, and when she reached the ford sent her horse right in before we could even shout a warning. She wouldn't have heard it if we had, the water was tearing so. Down went her pony and began to swim. Then she knew she was in bad. She never yelled, though. She sat as still as a statue on the horse; but when he struck the main current he slipped out from under her so quick that you couldn't see how it was done.

The Mocking Bird woke up first. He flew to where the gray stood without hobbles. One jump put him on the bareback. Two jumps, and the gray was breasting into Lone Pine Creek, headed down stream. The Mocking Bird slid off on the mane side when the gray began to swim, and swam with him. The gray caught up with the girl. The Mocking Bird reached out her and caught her dress. He pulled her to him, put his arm around her neck, and lifted her head high out of the water. We got to our horses, and followed down the creek. The Mocking Bird piloted the gray against the sand bank, then staggered out and laid the girl down.

"Look after her, boys!" he said, and tumbled over in a heap.

Some of the boys picked up the girl, and two of the boys went to the Mocking Bird. She was considerably messed up by that dirty water. When we made to wash the sand and mud out of her eyes, she sort of sighed some and opened on us. It came back to her slowly, and she eyed us as a pretty tough looking crowd, and asked, "How did I get out of that? Where is my horse?"

"He's about at Lone Pine now," I said.

Two of the boys stayed with the Mocking Bird, and we put the girl on a pack horse and made off up creek to the second ford where the crossing was better. Mrs. Henderson came running out, all excited at the news, and began to kiss and hug her and thank the Lord, until Deary stopped her.

"Don't smother me, Mother Henderson, and don't forget to thank these brave gentlemen who rescued me."

"We didn't rescue you," says Happy Joe Colton. "The Mocking Bird done it. We didn't do nothin' but gawk and wash the mud off."

She wanted to know all about him; but Mrs. Henderson was for getting her inside to the trunk; so she shook hands all around with us, and smiled at us as if we were the only men she'd ever seen in her life.

When we got to Lone Pine the two boys and the Mocking Bird had come in. The Mocking Bird showed up at Larry's that night in his gray suit, looking fairly handsome, but a little pale around the gills. He dealt out the night's play without once singing his little hymn. He was sore for a week, and then we almost forgot it.

The Mocking Bird was sitting alone at the table with his head in his hands, when it happened. Through the stillness broke the sudden bang of a gun, the shivering of glass, and somebody yelled. "Look at the Mocking Bird!" He had pitched forward on the table. Larry came running.

"The man who done it! Get him!" he yelled.

Out of the place we piled, and there he was, running up the street. Happy Joe swung out his gun and winked him, and he slowed up. Then we closed in. It was Dirty Jim. We took him down among the cottonwoods on Lone Pine Creek and left him there.

The Mocking Bird was hurt mighty bad. We carried him gently up to Purdy's and laid him down. Doc Burridge came. He looked sorrowful and didn't give us much encouragement. "It went through the lungs, boys," he says. "There's internal hemorrhage. He's got a chance; but it's slim. He needs a woman nurse."

"Frisco," said Larry—"Frisco's the only place. Who'll undertake to go to Reno and telegraph for her?" "Here's me," says Happy Jack, quick.

Larry pulled a handful of twenties out of his breeches' pocket. "Hump yourself, Happy!" he says. "Telegraph from Reno for the best one at the bay. Pay any price; but come

quick! Go a thousand if you have to. Wait and bring her. It's the Mocking Bird that's wantin' it."

Doc Burridge picked me out to stay with him. He drove the crowd away, and we two went through what was left of the night with the wounded man. It was a hard hurt. Not once since the shot had the Mocking Bird spoken. He gasped for breath and gritted his teeth in agony.

Old Man Henderson came down from the ranch next day, and heard it first thing. He told me afterward how the news went out there. It was supper time when he got back. The old woman saw that something was out of line with him. She made inquiry.

"The Mocking Bird was shot in Lone Pine last night," he said.

Deary put down her utensils. Henderson went on with the details, telling how bad the Mocking Bird was hurt, and that they had sent all the way to Frisco for a woman nurse—because Doc Burridge had said he must have one. "They'll rush her through, and she ought to be here in eight days," he concluded.

Deary rose from the table. "Mr. Henderson, I want my horse and a man to ride with me. I don't know the trail."

Mrs. Henderson protested. It was improper.

"Perhaps it was improper, mother, when he put his arm around me down in the creek that day. I've never felt that way about it. Besides that, a man who suffers needs a woman. Eight days are a century to wait with bungling men to do a woman's work. May I have the man at once, Mr. Henderson?"

It was four o'clock in the morning when there was a gentle tap on the door, and I opened it. Deary came in so quietly that you would have

(Continued on Page Seven.)



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